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The Archaeology of Pennsylvania's

Changing Frontier



The Contact Period
1500–1763

Frontier is defined as "the border land" between two different groups of people. Four hundred years ago, Pennsylvania's frontier was the boundary between Europeans and Native Americans. As European settlement advanced westward, so did the land considered to be the frontier.

Historians and anthropologists call the time period when European and Native Americans began to interact, the Contact Period. In Pennsylvania, it covers the interval from when Europeans first met Native Americans to the end of the French and Indian War, approximately 1500 to 1763. Naturally, these two groups shared ideas, traded goods, and unfortunately for the Native Americans, were affected by disease and warfare. It was a period of cultural transition for both groups, fragmentation of Native American groups, and ultimately, the collapse of Native American cultures in Pennsylvania.

We do not know what the tribes called themselves at the time of contact, but today they are known as the Delaware, the Susquehannocks, and the Monongahela. Geography influenced where they chose to live: the Delaware along the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers; the Susquehannocks along the lower Susquehanna River; and the Monongahela along the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers. Each of these tribes interacted with the Europeans in diverse ways and the short-term results were different.

The Monongahela—a brief period of contact

The Monongahela culture was located in the Upper Ohio Valley. They were an agricultural people who lived in small circular houses organized in villages of up to several hundred people. These villages were frequently surrounded by a stockade wall of wooden poles. During this period, other natives were functioning as middlemen between the Europeans and the Monongahela. Even though the contact was indirect, it disrupted native customs and patterns of living, leading to warfare and social unrest. Consequently, European contact, albeit indirect, was short and catastrophic for the Monongahela, who disappeared by 1635.

One of the last non-stockaded villages of the Monongahela culture, the Foley Farm, Greene County, was a crowded settlement. Archaeological excavations identified a large centrally placed petal-shaped building surrounded by as many as 50 houses.

The Susquehannocks and the start of the fur trade

While Columbus was exploring the Caribbean Islands, the Shenks Ferry Native American culture occupied the Susquehanna Valley. Their ancestors had probably lived here for hundreds or even thousands of years. By 1500, their oblong-shaped houses were arranged in concentric rings within a single or double stockade wall. This formed a village for several hundred residents with sites exceeding 50 to 60 houses. By 1550, people of the Shenks Ferry culture were replaced by the more powerful Susquehannocks who were an Iroquoian speaking group from New York. In contrast to the Shenks Ferry, the Susquehannocks lived in longhouses over 60 feet in length. The Schultz site is the earliest known Susquehannock village in the lower Susquehanna River Valley. The site, located on the east bank of the Susquehanna River, south of the village of Washington Boro, appears to have been occupied between 1575 and 1600 by as many as 1,300 persons. This site is twice as large as any of the preceding Shenks Ferry culture and documents the beginning of the fur trade between the Susquehannocks and the Europeans.

Native Americans were interested in European technology but were frequently suspicious of the Europeans and their

Fort Loudoun is located in Franklin County, Pen
served as a supply fort in the British efforts to exp
from western Pennsylvania. It was surrounded by a
with triangular-shap



The Foley Farm protohistoric Monongahela site is located in Greene County, Pennsylvania. This is a reconstruction of the village and an excavation scene of the work around the central house.

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culture. In most cases, the desire for European goods won out, and in the early 1600s, a booming exchange of furs for European goods began. Historians believe that the Susquehannocks may have moved south from their homeland in New York State to better control the fur trade from competing native groups. After the Susquehannocks over hunted their traditional territory, they began to trade with Indians in Ohio, New York, and Canada. These groups were jealous of the Susquehannocks position as middlemen, and much of the early Contact Period was characterized by intertribal warfare over control of the fur trade: the so-called Beaver Wars.

The Seneca of western New York were interested in improving their position in the fur trade, and several large-scale conflicts were fought between them and the Susquehannocks. The Strickler Village site, also in Washington Boro, is the probable site of one of these engagements. This site dates from the 1640s to about 1665 and spanned more than twelve acres, with a population of about 2,900.

By 1675, the Susquehannocks had been decimated by several epidemics and were finally defeated by the Seneca in a battle in York County. In the 1690s, with the retreat of the Susquehannocks to Maryland, the Seneca felt vulnerable to intrusions from the English and invited the Susquehannocks to return to Pennsylvania as a buffer. In the early 1700s, the newly established American colonial government created one of the first Indian reservations in Pennsylvania by giving the Susquehannocks land in Conestoga Township, Lancaster County.

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kler Susquehannock site is located in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. It is one
gest Native American towns that ever existed in our state. Pictured here is the
icted framework of a long house.

The Delaware and William Penn

For the Europeans, the essential goal in dealing with the Native Americans was to acquire their land. In most cases the result was warfare, and native people were killed or forced from their land. When William Penn arrived in the Commonwealth in 1682, in his charter he was required to "reduce the Savage Natives by gentle and just manners to the love of civil Societies and Christian Religion." His policy was to treat them fairly and buy their land, even though the concept of "buying land" was foreign to most Native Americans. This was accomplished through a series of treaties and by 1792, Penn and his descendents had purchased all of what is now known as Pennsylvania. Although payment had been made, Native Americans felt they were forced from their land.

The Delaware (also known as the Lenni Lenape) were the first Native Americans to be affected by Penn's policy of "fairness and equality to all." They seemed to have a different type of lifestyle than the other major tribes in the Commonwealth. Based on historic accounts, the Delaware Indians grew corn, but there is little archaeological evidence that they were as dependent on agriculture as other neighboring tribes. Rather than compact villages containing hundreds or thousands of residents, the Delaware frequently lived in small hamlets or scattered farmsteads. They did not seem to have the same social organization observed elsewhere, and their lifestyle is poorly understood.

Peace followed by conflict

Penn's policies created a time of relative peace in Pennsylvania and by the early 1700s, competition for furs and European goods had moved west. The remaining Susquehannocks resided at Conestoga Manor in Lancaster County while many Delaware had moved west or to the Wyoming Valley above the forks of the Susquehanna River. Encouraged by the New York Seneca, many small Native American groups that had suffered from disease and warfare at the hands of the Europeans, such as the Tuscarora, Shawnee, Nanticoke, and Tutelo, moved into Pennsylvania. Southeastern Pennsylvania became a mixture of Native Americans outnumbered by European settlers.

Mathew Patton was one of these early settlers who began a farm in the 1740s in Franklin County. He was doing so well that he undertook building a second house when a new conflict began. As France and England began to expand their lands in North America, the inevitable conflict between the two European superpowers began. Initially, the Delaware were undecided, but with intimidation from the French, they began raiding the English settlements. In one of their early raids, they attacked a series of communities in Franklin and Fulton counties, killing and capturing more than 100 people. Mathew Patton's farm witnessed one of these incursions, and it was burned to the ground. The French and Indian War served to unify a variety of displaced and fragmented Native American tribes who shared frustration and anger against other Europeans.

The war began when the French built a series of forts in western Pennsylvania in response to what they felt were English intrusions into their market area. Fort LeBoeuf, located south of Lake Erie, was one of several forts built to supply the more famous Fort Duquesne at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. The British built a series of forts along the Susquehanna, in the Great Valley, and along the Forbes Road, which went from the Susquehanna River to the Ohio River. George Washington hastily built Fort Necessity in 1754 as a defense against an overwhelmingly larger French force. Unfortunately, he built on a wetland and was forced to surrender after it rained during the battle. The rain caused his troop's muskets to misfire.

Built in 1756, Fort Loudoun, Franklin County, served as an important supply depot in removing the French from western Pennsylvania. The fort was never attacked, but it was the scene of a rebellion in 1765 by local citizens against the harsh treatment by the British garrison. Some consider this action the first act of the American Revolution.

The last cry and the last land

The French and Indian War was followed by Pontiac's War in 1763 which was the Native American's last act of anger and frustration. It was quickly over, and they were forced west of the Ohio River in 1763.

It was common practice in most of the original colonies for the colonial provincial governments to give displaced Indian tribes land. These areas were essentially the first Indian reservations. However, Pennsylvania did not follow this general policy, feeling that payment for land had been sufficient to fulfill humanitarian and government obligations. The last Native American land in Pennsylvania was the Cornplanter Grant, that consisted of 600 acres along the Allegheny River, near the New York border. Cornplanter, his descendents, and other Indians occupied this reservation until 1964 when the remaining residents were relocated upstream for the construction of the Kinzua Reservoir project. This project was strongly opposed by Native Americans and signaled the beginning of a revitalization of Native American Culture in America.

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Preserving the Past for the Future

Archaeology is the study of past human behavior. It seeks to identify patterns in human activity and explain how and why they change. Archaeology is also descriptive. It paints a picture of how people once lived. Using information recovered from the ground, archaeologists can reconstruct the histories of societies who do not have written records as well as minority populations who were insufficiently documented due to their social standing.

One way archaeologists study the past is by examining locations (sites) where people once lived, played, and worked. Prehistoric and historic sites are non-renewable resources. When a site is destroyed, information about the past is lost forever. Unfortunately, sites are ruined on a daily basis due to modern development, urban sprawl, and looting. Because unrecorded archaeological sites are those most often destroyed, every effort must be made to locate, evaluate, and record their content for the benefit of future Pennsylvanians before a development project is undertaken. If you know of locations where artifacts have been found and wish to assist with the preservation of archaeological sites, we encourage you to record these locations with the Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey (PASS). Information, recording forms, and instructions can be obtained at:

- www.PaArchaeology.state.pa.us
- www.phmc.state.pa.us/bhp/
- www.pennsylvaniaarchaeology.com

Pennsylvania
Historical & Museum
Commission

Edward G. Rendell, Governor
Wayne Spilove, Chairman
Barbara Franco, Executive Director

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The Contact Period 1500–1763

TRADE GOODS OF THE CONTACT PERIOD (1500–1763)

Time Line

Periods/Cultures

Examples are listed, as shown, from left to right.

European and Native American Goods

Objects are not to scale.

Increase of European Trade Goods Over Time

1763

COLONIAL

Gun lock
Coin
Glass wine bottle
Musket ball mold
Musket ball
Kaolin pipe

1700

REFUGEE

Catlinite stone pipe (Native)
Shell pendant (Native)
Glass wine bottle
Iron pipe tomahawk
Glass beads

1650

SUSQUEHANNOCK

Iron axe head
Hafted brass arrow
Salt glazed jug
Glass beads
Pot (Native)

1600

MONONGAHELA

Stone arrow point (Native)
Pot (Native)
Bangle (Native from European copper)
Effigy pendant (Native from European copper)
Glass beads
Fireclay stone pipe (Native)

1550

SHENKS FERRY

Pendant (Native from European copper)
Stone axe head
Pot
Pipe
Shell beads
Stone arrow point

1500



100%

0%

This culture has minor evidence of European trade influence.



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